

TMI's Garden Gift

The Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, home to The Monroe Institute, feature some of the most breathtaking landscapes on Earth.

The Blue Ridge is a part of the larger Appalachian chain, the world's oldest mountains. Indeed, there is something venerable and nurturing about these verdant, ancient hills, as though TMI is cradled in the arms of the archetypal grandmother.



It is difficult to improve on the harmony of the setting. Nevertheless, since the early 1990s Fay Atwater, wife of technical director Skip Atwater, has been doing just that.

When Bob Monroe was alive he was sometimes hesitant to invest in buildings and grounds makeovers. He felt that energy, time, and money could be better utilized.* Therefore, when Fay envisioned a bed of beautifully blooming flowers on the TMI campus she "stuck in about ten day lilies by the lab and waited to see if Bob would say something." He never said a word.

With Bob's tacit agreement Fay expanded the lily population. Next she adopted a flower bed that was originally planted by our office manager, Angie Smith, and her mom. At the request of Carolyn Ragland, TMI's hospitality manager, Fay added a new bed near the steps to the kitchen and dining room. Then, the patio at Roberts Mountain Retreat (RMR) was created and "screamed out that it needed some flowers."



Over time more garden spots have sprung up around NPC and RMR. Flower beds bursting with pansies, daffodils, and tulips reign during cold months; day lilies, moss rose, vinca, and geraniums emerge as the weather warms. Hanging baskets and large planters adorn the patios, decks, and porches.

Weeding, watering, mulching, trimming, planting and replanting have increased along with the number and size of the gardens. It's a tremendous commitment. In the beginning Fay volunteered her time and donated the plants. These days TMI foots the bill for the flowers, and Fay continues to provide her labor of love.

A few years ago Fay was joined by another green-thumbed volunteer, Ginna Colburn, TMI's current board of directors chairperson. Together they spend Fridays getting their hands in the soil. "Fridays are so much fun. While we're working we get to see the participants and staff. Programs are ending then and we can really interact with people on campus."



Visitors and staff arriving at The Institute are greeted by the colorful, dewy blooms full of life and energy. The plants are uplifting. They provide beauty that we take into our work, our communications, our program experiences; our families. Fay's and Ginna's gardens are gifts.

"It's our gift to everyone," Fay explains. "it's fulfilling -- it's deep. I've always loved plants and nature; the whole experience. If you ask me when it's 102 degrees F and Angie is running out with cold water to drink I may be less enthusiastic, but I look forward to doing it for participants, staff, community members. I paint with flowers on a beautiful canvas."

* ...notwithstanding the fact that Bob was married to Nancy Penn Monroe, a professional interior designer responsible for the lovely decor and finishes of the Nancy Penn Center and Roberts Mountain Retreat center.